The history of Socialism and its impact on Wisconsin labor is too rich and important to be forgotten. That seemed to be the theme of a fascinating session at the 25th Anniversary Conference of the Wisconsin Labor History Society at Milwaukee Turner Hall on May 13, 2006.

Former Milwaukee Mayor Frank P. Zeidler joined Aims McGuinness, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee History Department, to discuss the Socialist movement in the city which was dominant in the first half of the 20th Century.

The 93-year-old Zeidler, who must carry an oxygen tank with him, provided his consummate knowledge of the era and astounded the audience of more than 80. His words were as strong and articulate as ever, and he received a standing ovation at the end of the session.

McGuinness called Zeidler the “real thing” who was needed to discuss the history of socialism in Milwaukee, and the format included Zeidler fielding questions from the audience. He said the major questions to be answered were: why should we care about the history of socialism in Milwaukee and “how” should we remember it.

Why does racism now describe Milwaukee, once known for progressivism? An initial question wondered why Milwaukee which was known for its Socialist government and progressiveness from 1948 to 1960 is now known for its racial conflict.

“The decline of Socialism took place,” Zeidler said, “when I left office and was replaced not by a liberal Democrat, but by a conservative Democrat.”

He cited the fact that Milwaukee had a tradition of honest government, beginning with Emil Seidel, the first Socialist mayor, continuing through the long tenure of Mayor Dan Hoan (1916-1940), the second Socialist mayor. He continued: “The reputation of Milwaukee as a well-governed, clean city lasted for a long period of time. . . . That meant that contracts were put out without graft, that the Police Department was fairly much under control and that the needs of the people regarding shelter and other things were pretty well-watched and that labor itself was well-treated by city government.”

When Seidel took over in 1910, Milwaukee was a very corrupt town, Zeidler said, and in two years Seidel cleaned it up. The basis of Socialism was that the public would assume ownership of the basic means of production, and in Milwaukee that meant owning the water works, the sewerage plant and owning the streetcar company.
Why are Milwaukeeans wary of government now? A questioner said that while Milwaukee has a “great park system” and other good services, it is viewed badly now. Zeidler explained the population of Milwaukee has profoundly changed, and many of the newcomers to the community do not have the same traditions of the older residents of the city. He noted that many former residents of the city have moved to the suburbs and now vote conservatively.

What can be done to change the city to be more reflective of the progressive traditions of the Socialists? How can we balance the recognition for what progressives have done to fight racism, but also what have progressives and Socialists failed to do? These two questions brought a long response:

Zeidler said the Socialist Party lost lot of its clout in the 1930s, partly due to the major labor movement, upon which the Socialist party had piggy-backed its fortunes. When the Wagner Act was passed in 1935 giving workers the right to organize for the first time, the allegiance of the labor movement passed from the Socialists to the Democratic Party of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

“From 1935 on this became a liberal Democratic community in which the labor leaders were no longer Socialists,” Zeidler said.

McGuinness noted that some Socialists like Berger were “white supremacists” and opposed immigration from China, while other Socialists included E. B. Dubois, the famous African-American leader. He also cited Oscar Ameringer, who was a disciple of Berger and later went to Oklahoma where he set up one of the most remarkable political movements for political and racial justice in a Socialist-union movement.

The question is, McGuinness said, whether to forget about the uglier parts of socialism and not take any lesson from that, or to recognize that these factors existed in an environment in which these people lived in the early 20th Century when white supremacy was a way of life.

Many people, nonetheless, took Berger’s ideas and went in other directions, specifically to work against racism, he added. By the 1920s, Berger became a sponsor of anti-lynching legislation and over time began to shed his racist ideas, McGuinness said.

Zeidler responded by noting the the Socialist movement in Milwaukee had a strong philosophical base, including an antiwar and pacifist feelings. During World War I Berger others were indicted for writing editorials for opposing the war. There was a reaction against the Socialist movement that developed because it wasn’t militaristic, he said, and in the 1930s because it was not “vocal enough against Hitler.”

Another philosophy was the belief in “class warfare,” a belief that was shared by communists who wanted a more violent change in government, he said. Soon, the Socialists got tagged by the title of “communists,” which further weakened them, he added.

In addition, the Socialists were identified with the International Workers of the World (IWW) and that group’s more unpopular views, he added.

What was Zeidler’s role in the Kohler strike? One incident highlighted Zeidler’s support for labor, the so-called clay boat incident which occurred in 1955 during the Kohler Strike (the nation’s longest strike in history). Zeidler recalled that the strike followed an earlier strike in the 1930s in which two strikers were killed. When the ship from Canada attempted to offload clay (used for porcelain fixtures) in Sheboygan, residents protested. The ship could not unload, and was diverted to Milwaukee, where the dock workers were employees of the City.
“If there’s one tradition in Wisconsin history, it’s that you can’t cross labor in the Kohler business,” Zeidler recalled.

When he heard the ship was coming in, he said he ordered the police to set up lines to ensure that no one got on or off the docks. “There was a huge outcry to unload the boat,” he said.

He said he eventually got agreement with AFSCME District Council 48 Director John Zinos to unload the ship, since the point had been made. By then, however, the ship had moved off to Ontario, where it was unloaded and the materials were shipped by train to the Kohler plant. “The newspapers were in a rage for us not breaking that strike,” he said. The city was sued and lost the case, costing the city about $60,000, but, he added, “I wouldn’t break that strike, and I thought in the 1956 election they would use that against me, but they forgot all about that in 1956 because they attacked me then on the question of race,” he said.

How do you explain the growth of conservatism? Zeidler explained the growth of the suburbs is linked to the decline of socialism and the increase of conservatism. He said: “People got good jobs during the war and after the war and their ... status improved and they tended to move into the suburbs, particularly because they started the freeway system [which made it easier for people to get to work]. What happened was a separation of population in the city from people who had slightly improved their income and were able to move into the suburbs.”

He said that once out in the suburbs where people tended to be more successful the former city residents adopted the more conservative views of the areas. “I know of several descendants of Socialist organizers and workers who became staunch Republicans,” he said. He said the move was an economic one for people moving up the ladder.

Did Milwaukeeans believe in Socialism? A comment was made that Milwaukeeans voted for Zeidler and Hoan “not because they believed in socialism but because they thought the Socialists would run clean government and they wouldn’t trust anyone else to.”

Zeidler explained that the Socialists under Dan Hoan in 1932 captured control of city government, only to lose it in 1936 over a dispute over socializing the power company in 1936. Zeidler said the labor movement switched from socialism to the Democratic Party during the New Deal era of Franklin D. Roosevelt, “more in line with the idea of Gompers” which involved the philosophy that private employers had the responsibility of providing decent wages and not the government.

McGuinness said that before Emil Seidel was elected in 1910 the Milwaukee government was corrupt and had a reputation of “terrible city government.” He said: “It’s not as though there was this huge Socialist movement in Milwaukee. And Socialists took advantage of this dysfunctional city government and said “Look, we can provide something better. And it’s in that spirit they win.”

In the two years of Seidel’s term, Milwaukee became known for its good government, he said.

How did Mayor Zeidler get elected during the 1950s when the McCarthy era was present in Wisconsin?

Zeidler said he was elected by a series of flukes, partly due to fact in primary there was a long slate of candidates and he was listed first; secondly because his brother Carl, who had been elected mayor in 1940 and was lost at sea during World War II, was a popular figure; thirdly, he had support of the labor movement; fourthly, the Milwaukee Leader printing operation got out his pamphlets; and finally, he said he was
the only candidate with a program.

In 1956, the issue was race, he said, and it was used against the Socialists, because the party had said everyone who came to Milwaukee would be treated equally, and “that was not very popular,” he added.

McGuinness noted that Zeidler won in 1948, even after many Socialist Party leaders had “jumped ship” to the Democratic Party and also that Zeidler was extremely effective as a “hard-working” campaigner. He said it was extraordinary that he was able to win in spite of the lack of party support or newspaper support.

He said the Zeidler files in the Milwaukee Public Library contain many pieces of “hate mail,” particularly in 1952 and 1956 races. “It’s heart-rending to read the vicious racism of these letters,” he said, “and that Mr. Zeidler is continually pilloried with the ‘n’ word and as a communist.”

He added that it must have been “very lonely” for Zeidler to be a Socialist mayor in the City of Milwaukee in 1956, and Zeidler said the issue in that election was the question of why African-Americans were coming to Milwaukee from the South. This was the occasion for real estate people by telling Milwaukee homeowners that black neighbors would cause their property values to decrease, a process called “block-busting.” There were also charges that the mayor was in favor of bringing African-Americans to Milwaukee and had (it was falsely claimed) even erected signs in the South urging emigration to Milwaukee.

Zeidler said that one of most important things the city did then was to set up a Committee on Community Relations, that covered a diverse sectors of the community that dealt with the race relations of the community. The party from 1956 to 1960 was focused on that problem.

Zeidler said the Progressive movement is well-remembered throughout the state, while the Socialist Party, which also accomplished much in Milwaukee, has been largely forgotten. He said that the Progressive movement grew out of Robert M. LaFollette’s problems within getting the Republican Party, and its focus on getting fair prices for farmers. The focus of the Socialist Party was for public ownership of key parts of the society.

In 1935, he said, the Socialists agreed to go off the ballot and joined with the Progressives and Democrats to save a law in support of Wisconsin’s labor unions. It was called the Farmer-Labor Progressive Federation, whose offices were in the Turner Hall. It lasted until 1941, when many Progressives moved into the Democratic Party, and later were joined by many leading Socialists, including Daniel Hoan.

In 1946, when Robert La Follette was running for reelection, the old-line Republicans got behind Joseph R. McCarthy who won the primary and then the election. Zeidler said that when McCarthy first got elected, he had some liberal streaks, “and he worked with us on housing for the veterans and for the elderly.” Zeidler continued: “In 1952, when he had nothing to run on, someone convinced him to run on the issue of communism. McCarthy, furthermore, never attacked anybody in Wisconsin.”

McGuinness stressed the point that to understand progressives in Wisconsin, people needed to understand Socialists, since they were very much a part of the story here. He added that “the word ‘socialism’ has been completely been excised from the political vocabulary . . . and as a result it’s not just the name that has been lost but the whole idea, such as the notion that government can actually do some good.” He said this idea that government can do some good for people has been at the heart of socialism and is being lost in the current political rhetoric.

Why are the Socialists not well remembered?

He said keeping the idea of socialism alive is
the “defending of our ideals and the richness of our political history.”

Zeidler explained that the Socialists in Milwaukee were based on supporting labor issues, in developing the area’s marvelous park system (through such Socialists as Charles Whitnall) and public housing initiatives. “That’s where they got the name ‘sewer Socialists,’” and differentiates them from those Socialists who followed the more broad teachings of Karl Marx, he said.

He added that the Socialists were “interested in environmental protections” and fought for clean air and water measures.

McGuinness summed up the meeting by saying it was important to look at history realistically and truthfully. “Milwaukee was never a paradise for Socialism and Socialists were never saints. These were human beings who were distinguished not because they were superhumans but they devoted their lives to making this city and this country and the world a better place. Keeping that memory alive is hard work and, in my opinion no one has worked harder and done that better in the history of Socialism than [Zeidler].”

The session ended with Frank Zeidler being given a prolonged standing ovation.

Recorded and transcribed by Ken Germanson, May, 2006